WORLD SUMMIT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Copenhagen
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Attacking Poverty

Building Solidarity

Creating Jobs

UNITED NATIONS

A New Age for Old Age

The "age of ageing", the "gray revolution", "humanity's coming of age": these and similar phrases are now part of common discourse and have a clear statistical basis.

In the 75 years from 1950 to 2025, the world's population of elderly people (those 60 years old and over) will have increased from 200 million to 1.2 billion, and from 8 to 14 per cent of the total global population.

In the same 75 years, the very old (those aged 80 and above) will have grown from 13 million to 137 million. In short, between 1950 and 2025, the total world population will have grown by approximately a factor of three, the elderly by a factor of six and the very old by a factor of ten.

Rising to the Challenge

The developed countries — whose populations are ageing fastest — are adjusting and refining policies and programmes, addressing the needs of older people, including not only how they can be cared for, but how they can continue to participate in society. These countries are attempting to adjust national spending to reflect current and projected demographic ageing and its ripple effects on such sectors as health, housing, education, welfare, employment, and income security.

The developing countries, whose populations are expected to age even more quickly in the coming decades than those of the developed countries have in the past, have begun gradually introducing ageing polices and programmes.

Population ageing in developing countries is a critical problem because of two factors: a weak institutional infrastructure for meeting the needs of increasing numbers and proportions of the elderly and the uncertainty that families can continue to provide care and solidarity for the elderly as a result of many societal changes, such as migration and the increasing participation of women in public life.

A Key Summit Topic

The question of ageing will be an important topic of discussion at the World Summit for Social Development, which is to be held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in March 1995. The General Assembly has designated three core issues for the Summit — social integration, reduction of poverty, and productive employment — each of which has important implications relating to ageing.

The Summit will consider how to maintain and improve the participation of older people in social and economic activities, how to protect older people from poverty, and how to adapt employment policies to the needs of the elderly.

The policies and programmes recommended by the Summit will be integrated into the continuing activities of the United Nations programme on ageing.

The challenge of ageing to governments of both developed and developing countries falls along two interrelated paths: first, the overall impact of population ageing on all sectors and generations; and second, the situation of older people as their traditional status and roles in society change — whether it is the "young old" or the very old.

In addressing the situation of older people in rapidly changing societies, the rights and responsibilities of older women, older migrants and refugees need particular attention to ensure that they share equitably in social and economic entitlements.

Despite the complexities of the issue, one clear policy option has emerged in recent years for both developed and developing countries: "help for self-help", a term for government policies that support and facilitate choice for older people to remain active in society as agents and beneficiaries of development. Help for self-help is a policy option that recognizes the dignity and capabilities of older people while address-

ing their need for employment, income security, and social integration.

The Role of the United Nations

The United Nations programme on ageing involves the Secretariat and a number of the Organization's specialized agencies, including the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organization, UNESCO and others. The effort involves cooperation with Member States, experts and organizations of the elderly in setting standards and in devising policies and programmes.

The question of ageing was first discussed at the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. It was not evident then that the world's population would age so dramatically in the coming decades. Twenty years later, in 1969, the General Assembly re-examined the issue, calling, eventually, for a World Assembly on Ageing to be convened in 1982 in Vienna, Austria.

The World Assembly adopted the International Plan of Action on Ageing and, later the same year, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed it. This Plan, the first global instrument on ageing, guides the United Nations programme. Every four years, the United Nations Secretariat conducts a global appraisal of progress in implementing the Plan.

The Global Programme

In 1992, ten years after adopting the International Plan of Action on Ageing, the General Assembly endorsed a set of global and suggested national targets on ageing to be reached by the year 2001. Also, the Assembly designated 1 October every year as the International Day for the Elderly. It designated the year 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons.

Future activities of the United Nations programme on ageing will revolve around these events. The period 1992-2001 has been established for reaching a set of global and suggested national targets on ageing. Each event offers an occasion to examine the impact of ageing on society and the situation of older people in that society.

Activities proposed for 1 October, the International Day for the Elderly, include announcements by heads of State, municipalities and organizations; conferences; media discussions; skills exchange among older people; intergenerational debates; and essay and art celebrations in schools. Proposed themes for the years ahead, which tie in with major United Nations years or conferences, are as follows:

1 October

1994 "Older Persons and the Family"
1995 "Employment Opportunities for Older Women and Men"
1996 "Eliminating Poverty in Old Age"
1997 "Celebrating Organizations of Older Persons"
1998 "Older Persons Support International Year of Tolerance"
1999 "Towards a New Age for Old Age: A Society for all Ages"

The International Year of Older Persons (1999) will offer an occasion to assess the needs ahead, particularly in developing countries. A framework for the Year's observance will be elaborated by the United Nations Commission for Social Development in 1995. Two themes are being considered: "a new age for old age", which would address the situation of older people in changing socio-economic contexts; and "a society for all ages", addressing the complexities of society-wide adjustments to population ageing. Country programmes, international campaigns, expert debates and local celebrations are envisaged.

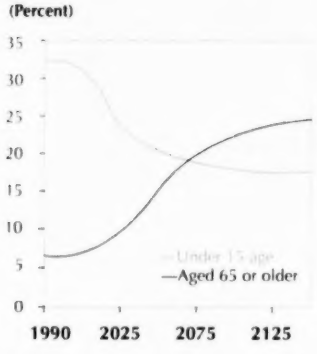
A practical strategy on ageing was endorsed for the period 1992 to 2001. The targets guide current actions on ageing and will give direction to the fourth and fifth appraisals of the implementation of the International Plan of Action on Ageing at the United Nations Commission for Social Development in 1997 and 2001, respectively.

The year 2001 will be a capstone for the century in which developed countries aged and, at the same time, the launching pad for the decades in which developing countries are projected to age with unprecedented rapidity.

For further reading:

- *International Plan of Action on Ageing* (DPI/932)
- *Global targets on ageing for the year 2001: A practical strategy* (A/47/339)
- *Third Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the International Plan of Action on Ageing* (E/CN.5/1993/7)
- *United Nations Principles for Older Persons*
- *The World Ageing Situation 1991* (ST/CSDHA/14)

Changing Age Structure of World Population, 1990-2150



Note: Based on medium fertility projection

Source: United Nations Population Division, Long-Range World Population Projections: Two Centuries of Population Growth, 1950-2150, (United Nations, New York).

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